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PROGRAM Great Decisions '85

STATION WETA-TV
PBS Network

DATE April 21, 1985 1:00 P.M.

CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT Gelb/Turner: Intelligence Activities

ANNOUNCER: Great Decisions '85, the nonpartisan series which brings together over a quarter million Americans for the discussion of major foreign policy issues, produced in cooperation with the Foreign Policy Association and the University of South Carolina. This program was recorded at the Woodrow Wilson House in the Embassy Row section of Washington, D.C.

EDWIN NEWMAN: Hello. I'm Edwin Newman for Great Decisions '85, in which we join a quarter of a million Americans who take part in this discussion program on foreign policy.

Today we take up America's intelligence activities, and in particular undercover operations. Does our country need covert operations, including, at times, the overthrowing of other governments? If it does, how do we reconcile the need for secrecy with the right of the people and the Congress to know and indeed control what is being done?

To discuss these questions we have with us Admiral Stansfield Turner, United States Navy, Retired, former Director of Central Intelligence; and Leslie Gelb, national security correspondent for the New York Times, formerly Director of the State Department's Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs.

Admiral Turner, does the country need covert actions, covert operations?

ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER: Yes, it does, Ed. But let's define the situation first. The primary role of the Central Intelligence Agency is to conduct intelligence activities: collecting information abroad, analyzing, interpreting it, and

giving it to our policymakers.

Covert action, as it's defined in a law of the Congress, is not intelligence work, it's trying to influence the course of events in another country without the source of that influence being acknowledged. In short, it's an action activity of foreign policy, not an intelligence activity of collecting information on which to base a foreign policy.

NEWMAN: Will it necessarily be military, paramilitary?

ADMIRAL TURNER: No, there are three different types of covert action. The first is propaganda, putting out information that we want other people to have, but we don't want them to know we're the source of it. Political support, maybe providing money or other advice to politicians in other countries whose opposition is being supported by the Communists. And finally, paramilitary action, providing arms and military advice to groups that are using arms to conduct political activity.

Now, either political support or paramilitary action can attempt to topple a government of some country. And that's where it gets highly controversial.

NEWMAN: Do we need covert operations, Mr. Gelb?

LESLIE GELB: I do not think that the United States should deny itself this instrument, the covert instrument. I think the real question is and should be, every time we face this question, (A) what is the policy that informs and creates the need for covert action? Does the policy make sense? And secondly, do we really benefit from doing it covertly, and can it work that way?

Usually, the debate focuses simply on the fact that the act is intended to be secret, or at least to be unacknowledged, not on whether the policy makes any sense, or whether the instrumentality, in this case, although delicate, complicated, sometimes not secret, makes sense.

ADMIRAL TURNER: I'd like to emphasize a point that Les made here. The Church Committee of the Senate of the United States, that studied intelligence very intensively in 1975-76, came to the conclusion that covert actions had not been very successful when they weren't in support of a policy -- the point you made at the beginning. You've got to have government policies. Covert action can't be the policy.

The reason we're in trouble in Nicaragua today with the Contras' covert action is that it's the only policy we have for that country. We don't have an agreed national approach to dealing with Nicaragua.

NEWMAN: Do you mean covert operations are sometimes dreamed up and carried out without regard to the national policy of the United States?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, not quite that bad. In 1974 the Congress passed a law called the Hughes-Ryan Amendment. I stipulated that anytime the CIA does a covert action, it must get the approval, expressly, of the President of the United States, and it must then inform the two intelligence committees of the Congress. So it is not something that's done totally by the CIA on its own, separate from policy.

But what I am saying is in Nicaragua today there isn't really a national consensus on what our policy for Nicaragua should be. And so doing a covert action down there is not a wise move, because it isn't trying to support some basic policy; it is the policy. And it won't work.

GELB: Let me just follow up on that, if I may.

My sense is that the so-called covert action against the government of Nicaragua was really pushed by the policymakers in the Reagan Administration, and not by the Central Intelligence Agency.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Oh, yes. Because they had no other policy, and they found this was a way to try to do it.

GELB: Put pressure on the Sandinistas. How do you do it? Well, you can squeeze them economically. But that's not enough. They're helping the guerrillas in Salvador, so let's have a guerrilla action against them in Nicaragua.

But taht does not a policy make. Sometimes it complicates your ability to formulate a policy later on.

NEWMAN: I had a sense a minute ago, Mr. Gelb, that you were going to suggest that, almost by definition, covert operations don't achieve what it is hoped they will. Was I wrong?

GELB: Yeah, you are wrong. I think that there are a number of occasions, many occasions, particularly when you take stands in three categories, where covert operations have done what they're supposed to do. They've been effective, and I think they've been consistent with our democratic system.

NEWMAN: Which ones have succeeded, that you feel able to identify?

GELB: Well, one can take, I think, a whole series of covert actions that were done in Europe at the end of World War II to try to buttress democratic forces in Western Europe. And I

think those were almost without exception successful.

NEWMAN: But that was, of course, a different world, in which there was a clear line being drawn in Italy, for example, as Admiral Turner said, where we supported the Christian Democrats led by De Gasperi, with the express intention of seeing to it that the Italian Communists did not come to power. The same thing, for that matter, in France.

The issue, in a way, was simpler then, was it not? is that why there seems to be less confidence in our leaders in their judgment on these matters?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, you're absolutely right. You see, we did have a firm policy in Italy and France. We wanted the democratic forces to survive, and Communism not to take control. And so there was full national support for those covert activities.

When it came out in 1974 that we had been meddling in Chile, trying to do basically the same thing, keep a Communist from coming to power by electoral means, the attitude of the country had changed and the public was not willing to support that kind of a covert action. It didn't happen to succeed, anyway. But one of the reasons, I believe, it didn't is that it wasn't something we were in national agreement about.

GELB: And again the policy, I think, is the key factor here. Let me give you two other examples where I think the covert action made sense and worked.

One was in 1974-75 in Portugal. There, that government was teetering on whether it was going to go Communist or stay pro-Western. And our government carried on a number of covert actions that I think kept that country democratic and free. It worked.

The second example is -- and this is a very difficult one -- is the covert aid being given to the Afghan rebels to fight against Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Now, this commands substantial support in the U.S. Congress. In fact, Congress has increased the amount of aid over and above what the Administration asked for to these rebels.

Does it make sense for us to support a group like that against a Soviet invasion of Afghanistan? I would say most Americans think it does.

NEWMAN: Admiral Turner, you mentioned Chile. But there was a disagreement, was there not, about whether the United States had any business overthrowing Allende, who had been

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elected in what was thought to be a reasonably fair and open election?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes. And because there was that national disagreement, the CIA was resoundingly criticized for doing that.

The whole Chile operation, though, raises a very fundamental issue, and that is whether Presidents ought to be able to do covert actions in lieu of an open policy move in some part of the world.

That's why, under the Hughes-Ryan Amendment, we've brought the Congress into this act, and it isn't strictly a presidential thing anymore, as it was before 1974. So the President must inform the Congress. They don't have to approve what he's doing, but then they can take various actions, like passing laws or failing to appropriate money, to cut off a covert action if the President is not in tune with the people and the Congress.

NEWMAN: Well, to go back to what Les Gelb was talking about before, if each policy is judged on its own merits, or each action is judged on its own merits, the overthrow of the Allende government in Chile has left Chile with, so it seems, a particularly grim dictatorship for years. The same thing happened when we overthrew the government in Guatemala.

So, a certain amount of the criticism has been directed not merely at the fact that these operations were undertaken, but that they didn't bring about desirable results for the people of those countries.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, I think one of the ways in which you measure whether you should undertake a covert action, particularly one to overthrow a government, is do you have a reasonable prospect of success? And in overthrowing a government, success has got to be defined in terms of will the next government likely be better than the past.

I think that's one criterion. And Les has been emphasizing that, I believe, in what you've been saying. Is it going to work? Is it going to do something that the country wants?

A second criterion I would emphasize is, is it really important? The law, the Hughes-Ryan Amendment, says any covert action must be, quote, important to the national security, unquote. Why? Because you don't want our democratic government doing more than absolutely necessary in a covert mode. The essence of our democracy is control of the government by the people. They cannot control what's done that they don't know about.

So, we want to minimize covert action to quite important activities, to activities where it's going to be successful, to activities where you can keep it secretly. And finally, as we've been emphasizing, to activities where you have a definite policy that it's in support of.

GELB: There is also a question, and I think a serious one, in whether or not you can put covert actions to the same rough tests of public judgment that you do general policy. You know, if it's secret it's not going to be subjected to the kind of pounding and scrutiny that public policies are. At best, there'll be a small handful of people in the Administration looking at it, another small group in the Congress; and they can often make mistakes and not ask questions, probe as deeply as something that does get into the general public domain.

And I think it means, and it has meant historically, that we often do a lot of foolish things covertly and often make a lot of mistakes.

NEWMAN: Well, how many people in the Congress actually get to know about covert action?

ADMIRAL TURNER: In 1980 we got the Congress to pass a law that said two committees of the Congress, the two Intelligence Committees. I believe the Appropriations Committees have insisted that they know about them also, and they have the power of the purse, and so I believe they're still informed.

So, it's four committees. That would be roughly 60 or so congressmen, let alone staff people. Now, they aren't all actually informed in each case. The CIA goes to those committees and says, "We are undertaking the following covert action. Do you want to be briefed on it?" And some of them do and some of them don't. So I would guess, on the average, it's much less than 60 members of Congress really get into the details of one of these activities.

NEWMAN: Is that a workable system, Admiral?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes. I think it is workable.

NEWMAN: It protects the public interest?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I think it does very well. In the Carter Administration we did not have any leaks of covert actions.

But when you do something as big, as controversial, as not acceptable to the people as was the mining of the harbors of Nicaragua, and I think the entire covert Contra operation, then

it's going to leak and it's going to come out through one of these oversight processes, either being reviewed in the Executive Branch on its way to the President, or being reviewed by the Congress after the President signs it.

NEWMAN: As a practical matter, if a member of one of the committees being informed objected to the covert action being proposed, thought it was a bad idea, what could he or she do?

ADMIRAL TURNER: First, he or she can go to the Director of Central Intelligence, have a meeting, exchange a letter, whatever, to try to persuade first the Director of Central Intelligence, secondly the President, himself, that this is a bad idea. More importantly, he would try to get the entire committee behind him and have the committee take such a position with the President. Next, he can try to pass secret legislation that will actually order the President to change the covert action or cease doing it. And finally, and this did happen in 1982, they can pass public legislation. Now, that really discloses that there is at least some covert action going on. We did pass -- the Congress did, rather, in 1982 what's known as the Boland Amendment. And that amendment limited what the Congress wanted the Executive to do in Nicaragua.

NEWMAN: So the members of the committee do have the power to blow the whistle, so to speak.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes. But I think the lesson we have learned from how they tried to control the Contra operation in Nicaragua is that they've got to be pretty past off the mark.

They were a little slow on that one, don't you think, Les, and it'd gotten off a big momentum, and there's been a struggle with the Congress and the Executive that was unnecessary if the Congress had been more firm earlier on?

NEWMAN: Then a particularly heavy burden, then, rests on the members of the committees that are informed or to which the offer of being formed...

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes. And it's different for the Congress than most things. In most cases, the Congress has got to give approval. I mean, after all, you can't get money in our government unless the Congress approves it.

In this instance, we don't want the Congress to approve each covert action, in my opinion. We want them to be informed of it, and then take the initiative to stop it if they don't want it. Why? Because sometimes you want to move with a covert action very quickly.

Once or twice -- and it did happen once while I was

Director -- you want to do a covert action without informing the Congress ahead of time. There's just too much risk to human life if anybody who doesn't absolutely need to know knows it. The law provides that you must then explain to the Congress after the fact why you delayed informing them. I think that's an adequate safety valve.

NEWMAN: Les, you've been on both sides of this. How far should newspeople go in seeking out information about such actions and making it public?

GELB: I don't have a good answer to that at all, Ed. If a story comes my way about a covert action, I will generally write about it, but within limits. I'll talk about how much money has been appropriated for the Afghan operation, the kinds of arms involved, that it's being fed through the Pakistani government. But I won't go into further detail about the operation because I think that that really could jeopardize people's lives. And what I've written about is plenty sufficient to get a public debate going about the policy that's informing the covert action.

So I guess I do generally write about it, but I draw the line at anything that would risk lives.

NEWMAN: We've recently had an instance in which information about a military satellite launched from the space shuttle was made public by some news organizations. Did it serve the public interest that that information got out?

GELB: But that was such nonsense, that issue, Ed. It really was. Because what the newspapers and magazines published was something that was generally known. And the Russians know far more than that. And it got even sillier when the Administration decided not to announce the time of the launching, as if the Russians didn't know that to the mini-second, or the time of the release of this satellite up in the sky, as if the Russians wouldn't watch every move of that. It really got nonsensical.

Let me just add a point to that. If we're talking about the exact capabilities of that satellite, what it can tell American leaders about exactly what the Soviet Union is doing, then I think that's fair for the government to be able to keep that secret. There's no reason the public has to know that. We're not going to be a more democratic, informed people by virtue of that knowledge. And if we did give that information to the Soviet Union, they could deny our obtaining the information that we could otherwise get.

NEWMAN: Let's take another recent example, the manual of operations that was prepared by some CIA people for the

Contras in Nicaragua, which included the well-known phrase about neutralizing various Nicaraguan leaders and officials.

Was there a lack of supervision from the top of the CIA in that matter?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, clearly, the word has not got down to the lower levels, in this case, apparently, people who were brought in especially for this activity, not full-time CIA people, that the President, starting in 1976 with Mr. Ford, continuing through both Mr. Carter and Mr. Reagan, has outlawed assassination or any form of political murder. That manual apparently did condone that.

So, yes, there was a lack of thoroughness in having the agency people understand the rules under which they're operating.

NEWMAN: Maybe there's no answer to this question, but how could that be?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, that takes a lot of philosophy, Ed. I get in trouble for saying this sometimes, but I'll say it again. A lot of CIA people, who were very fine intelligence people, were raised in that agency for 30 years with no oversight, no accountability, no real external controls. I found that some of them could not adjust to the changes that had to be made after the Church Committee investigations of 1975. The country, the Congress demanded that we put some kind of checks and balances on the CIA.

People who have not operated under any control for 30 years, in some instances, found it difficult to adjust to that. I think they probably brought some of those back for Nicaragua, and they still hadn't really understood.

And let me make a final point on that, and that is that controls over intelligence in our democratic society are essential, not just to protect the people, but to protect intelligence. As a result of not having any accountability over 30 years, the CIA did make some mistakes.

You, Les, I, all of us would be a little less careful about decisions we make if we know we're not going to be held accountable. They weren't bad people in the CIA in those days. They were people who got carried away with enthusiasm to support the country, to do what they thought was needed. But they did some things that were in excess.

In our democratic society, when those eventually, as they almost always will, came to the surface, almost all human intelligence activity in the CIA came to a grinding halt, partly

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because the Congress said stop, partly because the CIA professionals were very conscientious and they didn't want to do anything more that could cause more damage, more complaints about their activities. So they sort of slowed down.

What I'm saying is after 30 years of no accountability, our intelligence had ground itself to a halt. We need that oversight, that accountability to the White House, that accountability to the Congress in order to insure that we don't run into that problem again.

NEWMAN: If you have a section of an agency that is set up to carry out covert operations, will, in effect, the people in it not be sitting around dreaming up covert operations they can carry out?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes. Though the beauty of having assigned covert action to the CIA is that if you don't have much covert action going on, you can move those people over into doing intelligence work. And that's what we did in the 1970s when there was a lull in covert action.

I'd be very reluctant to see a separate agency created to do covert action because, as you suggest, if there wasn't a need for covert action, most people would be dreaming it up in order to stay in business.

GELB: I've found that most of the dreaming up of cockeyed covert operations came from policymakers more than from the professionals in the CIA. It was a toy in the hands of a lot of people, a way of out of making what they saw as otherwise tough decisions. They thought it was easier to do it this way. And I think a good many of the problems comes from that source rather than from screwball James Bond type operators.

ADMIRAL TURNER: And unfortunately, because of James Bond, there are even reasonably well-informed policymakers in our government who think we can do an awful lot more with covert action than we really can.

GELB: Uh-huh.

NEWMAN: Thank you very much, Admiral Turner.

Thank you, Mr. Gelb.